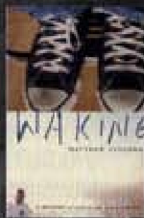
Q&A

crash course

AN ACCIDENT TAUGHT MATTHEW SANFORD WHAT HOLDS BODY AND SOUL TOGETHER

by Nina Utne

When Matthew Sanford *was 13 years old, an auto accident killed his father and sister and left him paralyzed. This physical and spiritual crisis changed him forever. As a paraplegic yoga instructor, he pays close attention to the mind-body connection, and this perspective has given him a unique insight into the nature of trauma. His book* Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence *was just published by Rodale. He recently spoke with me about his experiences. Matthew's website address is matthewsanford.com.*



Q&A

NU: Based on your experiences, how would you define trauma?

MS: Broadly speaking, trauma is a core loss of trust in the world, in life—when the world stops making sense to you. What's important to understand about that is that trauma happens to everyone; it's not just the extreme stories you hear about. For instance, the loss of childhood innocence is a big trauma. At that moment when you lost your childhood innocence, the world changed its shape. An essential part of trauma is that the world will never be the same again. And that requires you to reconfigure your relationship to the world.

NU: You say that everybody is traumatized, but there are examples like yours where there was a precipitating traumatic event.

MS: It's important to distinguish between a traumatic event (and the pain that accompanies it) and the effects of trauma, that is, how we respond to trauma. How we carry trauma forward throughout our lives can often be the real injury. For example, when I was in the car accident and broke my back and had all the traumatic injuries, the pain and suffering eventually ended. But 27 years later, I still carry trauma in little ways, like when I see the answering machine blinking and worry that something horrible has happened.

In my case, we were a fun-loving family of five driving home after Thanksgiving, and the unthinkable happened. I went to sleep in the backseat of a car; then I woke up to a world where my father and sister were dead and I was a paraplegic. It deeply violated my sense of trust in the world. I lost trust in the idea that if I just did the right thing everything would work out. That loss of trust is part of what I've had to heal, but this is both the injury and the gift of the trauma I experienced—now I truly know that anything is possible; the world is wide open.

NU: But arriving at that openness is a process, right?

MS: That's true. The really negative effect of trauma is that it dulls you, it deadens you. You're no longer in pain, but you're numb, and most people who have been through a lot of trauma at first have to be numb and only later can the trauma be transformed into possibility, into hope.

If you've had your heart broken in love and you just shut down and never let yourself love again—then you're really injured. The initial pain you felt when someone broke off a relationship that mattered is difficult, but it's the denial of life that comes after it that is the real injury.

NU: How do you get past that denial?

MS: Stories play an important part. The stories you tell about the world and the way you think about the world. They can be both positive and negative. For example, what happened to me is unfair and a really sad thing. I wish it hadn't happened. I wish my father hadn't died at 47. I wish my sister hadn't died at 20. I wish that I was still walking. All that's true, but if you stay with that story of unfairness, the effects of trauma are going to stay with you.

For me, a simultaneous story has taken hold. My life thus far has been like a river gaining current. I wouldn't be the person I am if what happened to me hadn't happened. And in fact I like who I am now. I think that I'm a better person than I would have been, although I don't know. My whole life's work is based on the relationship and fluctuation between mind and body, and no amount of bookwork would have given me the insight and intuition that were forced on me as a 13-year-old.

NU: Tell us about those insights.

MS: I was told by a well-intending medical model that the mind-body relationship below my point of injury, my chest, was basically over. I was paralyzed and I could learn to compensate for my paralysis and drag my body through life. What I've discovered through yoga is that there is a more subtle, invisible connection between mind and body that makes me feel whole. And this isn't just psychological stuff; I mean literally. I feel fluctuating energy between my legs and my upper body now. You squeeze my ankle, I feel a flow of energy up through my spine, like squeezing a tube of toothpaste.

No doubt this level of presence is more subtle. Is this level of presence ever going to make me walk again? Lift my leg against

gravity? Probably not. But it restores a sense of wholeness. If you tickle the bottoms of my feet I can't feel it the way you feel it, but there's another level of connection in the silence of my paralysis, and I was trained by the medical model to stop listening to it. Yoga has helped me to believe in it.

NU: I think we're all trained to stop listening to it.

MS: That's right. We all have a mind-body problem. But age introduces that same silence into the mind-body that my paralysis did. One of the things that yoga does is refine the quality of the presence we experience within our bodies.

NU: So what does this presence have to do with trauma?

MS: When trauma is not transformed over time, you become less present. You end up being kind of a shell of yourself. You don't take in the world with pleasure, you don't let it flow through you and you don't let it out. When you lose that presence, you lose connection to the world. That's when trauma turns into depression, and the more you become separated from the world, the deader you become.

Trauma registers in both mind and body. For example, I was asleep in the car when the accident happened. I have no memory of that day. But 12 years after the accident, when I started to do yoga, I started to have flashbacks, like posttraumatic syndrome flashbacks. My body was having memories. The echoes of the original accident were finally coming through. Part of the reason it took so long is that my mind was not ready to deal with what my body had witnessed. When I was 13, I learned to disassociate from my body to avoid pain. As I regained presence through yoga, these stored memories began to dissolve.

NU: These are all personal processes, but is there a role for the wider community in healing trauma?

MS: That's important. My experience is that trauma does not happen to one person, or even one family. It happens to a whole community of families. I missed the funeral for my father and sister because of my injuries, but there's something incredibly collectively healing about a funeral, to be around all the love for a lost one. It's part of the cleansing and healing. When we are in community—with other bodies and hearts—that spurs another level of cathartic release.

There are many types of collective trauma, too. We can never go back to before 9/11. The world will be different from now on. And of course the world's always had violence in it, there's always been anger. But our collective trust in the world and the security of the nation got shattered. So the question is, what do you do? How do you respond? Hitting back after an insult is one way to do it, but ultimately we're not going to transform this trauma by trying to violently counteract it. That's not going to work. I'm not saying 9/11 is a good thing, just as I'm not saying that my being paralyzed is a good thing, but what trauma does by challenging your assumptions is force you to see the world as more open. The challenge is to try to see it in a way that makes you love the world more. Essentially, to be open and compassionate.

NU: It's a paradox—the trauma makes you fearful, but it also frees you.

MS: Part of the wisdom of trauma comes from that paradox. Trauma requires me to acknowledge that my life has been harsh. Does it hurt? Yes. At the same time, I'm desperately in love with living, with the gift of life. Healing trauma calls on us to honor the life force and not be destructive with it. Does this feeling come from sadness, too? Yes, it's both. Simultaneously, I am heartbroken and desperately in love.

NU: It takes courage, though, to live with that paradox, doesn't it?

MS: Well, people sometimes call me courageous because of what I've gone through. But I think that's beside the point. I wanted to keep living. I wanted to be part of the world. Overcoming my disability—that doesn't even make sense to me. I am who I am because of my disability. It is my life, the only life I have, and so I'm going to live it. Is that brave? If that's bravery, then it's in a very large sense. I live my life knowing I want to be here.

NU: Then courageousness is simply being open to life, trauma and all?

MS: That's what I think. To know that living actually entails both life and death. In fact, that's what defines consciousness: the integration and acceptance of both life and death. If you're open to life, obviously you have to be open to the silence and sadness in life too. If that's bravery, then sure, call me courageous. But the simple fact is that I'm just living. I just love living. U